

St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
Fifteenth and Church Streets, N.W.  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-359

HABS,  
DC,  
WASH.,  
231 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DC-359

## SAINT LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Location: Fifteenth and Church Streets, N.W., Southwest corner, Washington, D.C. USGS Washington West Quadrangle  
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.323520.4308560

Present Owner: St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Present Use: Church

Significance: Tradition associates Calvin T. S. Brent (1854-1899), Washington's earliest known black architect, with the design of this church. St. Luke's rivals Mount Zion United Methodist Church in Georgetown as Washington's oldest surviving church building built for a black congregation. St. Luke's also stands as a reminder of the post Civil War period of Afro-American history when the institution of the church was unrivalled as the center of the Negro's political and social, as well as religious life.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Three lots on Fifteenth Street were purchased in August, 1875. Ground was broken for the structure in July, 1876, and the cornerstone laid on November 9, 1876, by Bishop William Pinckney. Because of a lack of funds, work was halted when the walls were about seven feet high. Work was soon resumed, and the first service was held in the incompleated church on Thanksgiving Day, November 27, 1879.
2. Architect: Based on church traditions, it would seem that the design was a joint effort of the Reverend Alexander Crummell and architect Calvin T. S. Brent.

Brent was born in the District of Columbia in 1854. He was twice married and had several children. The Brent family was a prominent free black family of pre-Civil War Washington. John Wesley A. M. E. Church was organized in 1849 in the home of Calvin's parents, John and Elizabeth Edmonson Brent, at Eighteenth and L Streets N.W. A sister of Calvin Brent was married to Garrett S. Wormeley, whose confectionery business was located in his brother's famous Wormeley's Hotel.

Calvin Brent was first listed as an architect in the 1875 edition of Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia. In later editions he was occasionally listed as a draftsman, but more usually as an architect. His address from 1877 through 1884 was given as 1006 19th Street, N.W., while from 1885 through 1899 he was listed variously as at 1038 18th Street, 1800 L Street, N.W., and at 1700 V Street, N.W. This latter house still stands, and was owned by his widow for a few years after his death.

Only one building positively identified as a design of Calvin Brent is known. At 1704 V Street, N.W. stands a two-story pressed brick residence, eighteen by twenty feet, built in 1891 at a cost of \$1,500 for Aleria Brown. According to the permit and ground plan, Brent was its architect (D.C. Building Permit #1809, March 25, 1891, U.S. Archives).

In an address entitled "The Negro as an Architect and Builder," Washington architect John A. Lankford (see HABS No. DC-362) told a convention of the National Negro Business League in 1906 that "I have been reliably informed that Calvin Brent, who died some six years ago . . . not only designed and built for public and private use, but built up squares of vacant ground and used them as real estate investments." Report of The Sixth Annual Convention of The National Negro Business League Held in New York City, August 16, 17, 18, 1905 (Boston, Mass 1905), p. 182.

Little else is known about Brent. Where, for instance, he received his architectural training is unknown. He died November 14, 1899, at Freedman's Hospital of a rupture of the bladder (Colored American, Nov. 18, 1899). A later tribute to him stated that:

The death of Calvin T.S. Brent . . . removes from active church and business circles of the District, a man of exceptional ability and untiring industry. In business life it was his distinction to adorn a calling that of Architecture, which has hitherto been chosen by few men of color anywhere, and his demise, from a race and local point of view, creates a void in this constantly growing department of industry. (Colored American, Dec. 2, 1899)

St. Luke's founding rector, the Reverend Alexander Crummell, probably had a major role in the design. Church tradition at St. Luke's credits Crummell with modeling his church on one he had seen in England. Crummell left the United States in 1847 and spent the next six years in England. Some of this time was spent traveling throughout the British Isles where he undoubtedly observed parish churches. From 1849 through 1853 he was preparing for the ministry at Queen's College, Cambridge. While at Cambridge he was most certainly aware of the flourishing Ecclesiological Society, a Cambridge-based movement interested in the

reform of liturgy and church building in the Anglican Church. (From this Society sprang a similar society in the United States.)

Inspired partly by the Catholic revival and the architectural concepts of the Catholic A.W.N. Pugin, the Ecclesiological Society had its beginnings in 1839. By the time Crummell was a student at Cambridge, the Society's influence was widespread. Pamphlets giving advice on church building were distributed, and many small, as well as large, parish churches embracing the architectural concepts of the Ecclesiologists were built. Like Pugin, the Ecclesiologists stressed that the Gothic style was not to be used for churches merely because it was picturesque. Instead, rational and purposeful planning, and the honest use of materials --- all hallmarks of the original Gothic style --- were stressed as the basis of the use of the revived Gothic Style. Thus even the simplest country parish church could be as architecturally correct as one built by a wealthy urban parish.

J.R. Oldfield of Downing College, Cambridge, England, has done considerable recent (1979) research concerning Crummell. Although he, like this writer, could find no documentary evidence that Calvin T.S. Brent had a part in the design process of the church, it is Oldfield's opinion that

Given Crummell's domineering personality it is quite possible that he presented Brent with a design to be drawn up in detail. This is pure speculation of course, but there is no evidence to suggest that Brent presented Crummell and the vestry . . . with a design. (Letter dated August 31, 1979, from J.R. Oldfield to Harrison M. Ethridge)

Calvin Brent could have been aided in his design work by publications, including those of the Ecclesiological Societies of Cambridge and of New York. The designer was probably also influenced by the Bishop of Maryland (whose diocese included the District of Columbia) William R. Whittington, one of the foremost American Ecclesiologists. While he was Bishop, many parish churches in his diocese were built in the Early English Gothic style, including the nearby Church of the Redeemer (now Mt. Zion Pentecostal Church) at 12th and U Streets, N.W.

On the basis of evidence, it seems plausible that the design of St. Luke's Church was the result of a union of the rector and of the young architect Calvin T.S. Brent.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

In August, 1875, three lots, the site of the present church, were purchased. Additional adjoining property has been purchased in subsequent years.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The builder is unknown. St. Luke's Vestry Minutes for May 31, 1880, cite a letter from a Mr. Gernhardt requesting payment for his stained-glass windows.
5. Original plans and construction: With the exception of a new adjoining Parish Hall, the church is substantially unaltered.
6. Alterations: On October 27, 1943, the church was condemned by the D.C. Inspector of Buildings because of a deteriorating stone wall. At a cost of \$30,000 the wall was strengthened and metal tie rods were stretched across the columns of the nave. Services were resumed in the church on July 15, 1945. (Washington Tribune, June 23, 1945.)

The first parish hall, a one-story brick addition, 27' by 40', on the south side of the church, was built in 1890. (D.C. Building Permit #546, Sept. 5, 1890.) In 1902 construction apparently began on a new stone parish hall that contained an assembly hall with stage and skylight, kitchen, and two water closet rooms. The estimated cost was \$1,500 (D.C. Building Permit #158, July 24, 1902). This second parish hall was razed in 1960, and in its place a larger stone parish hall was built. Its more contemporary form seems to conflict with the earlier modest church structure.

In the early 1970s Leroy Campbell, a local architect and a communicant of St. Luke's, oversaw the remodelling of the sanctuary. This remodelling included new pews, new wainscoting, new wall and ceiling treatment of the entrance vestibule and vestry, and central air-conditioning.

Other recent changes to the church have included replacement of the original doors on the front facade and replacement of the original stained-glass windows on the first floor of the front facade with more contemporary ones.

- B. Historical Events and Persons connected with the Structure: St. Luke's was the fulfillment of a vision for its first rector, Alexander Crummell, one of the foremost Negro intellectuals of his era.

Crummell, in his national appeal for the \$20,000 that was necessary to build the church, stressed that in many respects St. Luke's was "a national Church. The 43,000 colored people of Washington come from every state in the Union. . . Washington is a Mecca of the colored people; we must make a powerful position here." (Episcopal Churchman, Sept. 9, 1876.) Crummell also pointed out that his "own people are unable by themselves to do this whole work. But they have given; are constantly giving, and will give more. . . A very poor people, they intend to give in all full \$5,000 towards this work." (Churchman, Sept. 9, 1876.)

One original parishioner, Walker Lewis, solicited funds from prominent whites who were vacationing at White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia. Among those who contributed were William McKim, Governor Randolph of New Jersey, P.V. Daniel Jr. of Virginia, and General Lee. (Washington People's Advocate, May 19, 1876) The latter was not Robert E. Lee, who was dead by this time, but probably either of his sons or his nephew.

St. Luke's parishioners over the years have included men and women prominent in many endeavors.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: an exterior view that includes the old parish hall of 1902 is contained in a pamphlet "The Church Lives," by Fay McKeene Hershaw, Washington, D.C., Colorstone Press, 1974. (Available in the Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Public Library)
2. Bibliography: Dixon, Roger and Muthesius, Stefan. Victorian Architecture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Pp. 182-235 discuss English church architecture.

Hershaw, Fay McKeene. "The Church Lives" Washington, D.C.: Colortone Press, 1974. (Available in the Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Public Library) Contains an historical account written by Miss Clotilda Barnett.

Shinn, Rev. George W. Kings Handbook of Notable Episcopal Churches in the United States. Boston: Moses King Corp., 1889. Contains an early brief history of the church and an engraving that shows a front facade differing from the one actually built.

Stanton, Phoebe B. The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture: An Episode in Taste. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.

Stanton, Phoebe S. Pugin. New York: The Viking Press, 1971

Williams, Walter B. "Historical Account" of St. Luke's, contained in "The Order of Service for the Laying of the Corner Stone of St. Luke's Episcopal Church Parish Hall, Washington, District of Columbia, Sunday, May twenty-eighth, 1961." (Available in the Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Public Library)

Prepared by Dr. Harrison M. Ethridge  
Associate Professor of History  
Catonsville Community College  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
Summer, 1979

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character:

Anglican Ecclesiologists, who greatly influenced the probable designers, Rev. Alexander Crummell and Calvin T.S. Brent, preferred the honesty and simplicity of the Early English Gothic Style, which was particularly effective in small parish churches. While the designers used certain elements of this style in St. Luke's Church, they deviated from a strict adaptation in several ways. While on the one hand St. Luke's displays the ruggedness and simplicity of the Early English Gothic concept, its rigid exterior symmetry does not create the picturesqueness usually associated with the style. Also the precisely cut alternating red and tan limestone voussoirs are more akin to Ruskinian tradition than the Ecclesiological tradition of randomly laid stone.

2. Condition of fabric:

The exterior and interior are exceptionally well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular building is approximately 60 feet wide along 15th Street by approximately 100 feet deep along Church Street.
2. Foundation: Stone, load bearing.
3. Wall construction and finish: The walls are built of randomly laid "blue stone, quarried on the Potomac" (People's Advocate, May 6, 1876). Stone buttresses are located on either side of the main entrance and at the two corners of the Church Street side.
4. Structural system: Exterior walls are load bearing. On the interior, two rows of iron columns support the superstructure.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance contains two pairs of lancet doors separated by a limestone trumeau with foliated capital. On the extremities of the doors are engaged limestone colonettes with foliated capitals. Floral spandrels are above the doors. Above the doorways is a finished stone tympanum with a carved roundel.

Surrounding the entire doorway composition are carved stone voussoirs of alternating red and light-colored limestone.

On the Church Street side are two doorways. One has a pair of pointed arch doors with the original grooved board doors. The other, leading into the vestry, has the original doors with panels composed of diagonal boards.

- b. Windows: The most striking windows are the stained-glass ones in the upper portion of the east front and the altar window. The former is composed of five narrow lancet windows surmounted by tracery, the over-all composition creating a large single pointed-arch window. The pointed-arch altar window is composed of six lancet windows surmounted by a rose window and two quatrefoil windows.

On the north wall is a series of six single lancet windows, each with stained glass.

A memorial stained glass window dedicated to Bishop Pinckney is located on the interior of the church over the doorway leading from the nave into the vestry.

Two round stained glass windows are in the wall between the entrance vestibule and the nave.

Elongated, Gothic-inspired triangular windows with amber-color glass are in the clerestory.

- 6. Roof: The roof of the central portion is sharply pitched. The two adjoining roof portions are noticeably less pitched. The roof covering is slate.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. Basement: A long and narrow basement runs along the west wall under the chancel, and is reached by stairs from the Vestry.
- b. First Floor: The nave portion is approximately 90' by 55'-6". The nave is divided into six bays, each approximately 14' wide and separated by iron columns with simple Gothic-inspired foliated capitals. Above the capitals is an intricate system of laminated chamfered cross bracing between each capital. Part of the nave is taken up by a projecting one-half bay entrance vestibule.

The chancel is approximately 28'-10" wide by 29'-11" deep, but of the latter figure, 16'-5" extends into the nave. Thus



only a small part of the chancel is actually behind the chancel arch.

To the right of the chancel is the Vestry room, and to the left is a room of corresponding size.

2. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plastered and painted. The original wainscoting has been replaced with modern wooden material. The slightly arched ceiling is covered with stained tongue and groove boards that are divided into panels. Transverse steel tie-rods (installed in the 1940s to strengthen the structure) now mar the former openness of the ceiling and views of the stained-glass windows in the ends of the church.
  3. Interior features: The pulpit and Bishop's chairs appear to be among the early altar furnishings.
- D. Site: The church is located at the southeast corner of 15th and Church Streets N.W. The adjoining land to the south is also church property. The neighborhood is rapidly being revitalized, and is beginning to reflect its past when prosperous blacks and whites lived in close proximity to each other.

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